# *New York*
# Theatre Critics' Reviews
## *1954*

Volume XV, Number 18 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 6, 1954

### 1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
*Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes*

1953 Vol.

| *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|
| *Can-Can | 304 |
| Charley's Aunt | 179 |
| Dead Pigeon | 176 |
| End as a Man | 250 |
| Fifth Season (The) | 380 |
| In the Summer House | 168 |
| John Murray Anderson's Almanac | 191 |
| Kind Sir | 225 |
| *Kismet | 198 |
| Late Love | 258 |
| Madam, Will You Walk | 201 |
| Me and Juliet | 298 |
| My 3 Angels | 334 |
| Oh, Men, Oh, Women! | 184 |
| Picnic | 348 |
| Prescott Proposals (The) | 187 |
| Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker (The) | 165 |
| Sabrina Fair | 217 |
| Sing Till Tomorrow | 172 |
| *Solid Gold Cadillac (The) | 222 |
| *Tea and Sympathy | 266 |
| *Teahouse of the August Moon (The) | 254 |
| Wonderful Town | 344 |

1952 Vol.

| | |
|---|---|
| Dial M for Murder | 215 |
| *Seven Year Itch (The) | 186 |

1951 Vol.

| | |
|---|---|
| King and I (The) | 304 |

1949 Vol.

| | |
|---|---|
| South Pacific | 312 |

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 6, 1954*

### 1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1954

*Reviews Appear in This Volume*

| *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|
| Abie's Irish Rose | 248 |
| All Summer Long | 304 |
| *Anniversary Waltz | 339 |
| *Boy Friend (The) | 299 |
| Burning Glass (The) | 357 |
| By the Beautiful Sea | 335 |
| *Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The) | 382 |
| Confidential Clerk (The) | 370 |
| Coriolanus | 385 |
| *Dear Charles | 316 |
| *Fanny | 256 |
| Fragile Fox | 286 |
| Girl in Pink Tights (The) | 354 |
| Girl on the Via Flaminia (The) | 349 |
| Golden Apple (The) | 346 |
| Hayride | 319 |
| His and Hers | 393 |
| *Hit the Trail | 228 |
| Home Is the Hero | 307 |
| Immoralist (The) | 373 |
| King of Hearts | 342 |
| Living Room (The) | 251 |
| Lullaby | 377 |
| Mademoiselle Colombe | 397 |
| Magic and the Loss (The) | 332 |
| Midsummer Night's Dream (A) | 311 |
| *Mrs. Patterson | 231 |
| On Your Toes | 289 |
| Ondine | 362 |
| One Eye Closed | 236 |
| *Pajama Game (The) | 324 |
| *Peter Pan | 273 |
| *Quadrille | 259 |
| *Rainmaker (The) | 264 |
| *Reclining Figure | 294 |
| *Sandhog | 239 |
| Sea Gull (The) | 327 |
| Sing Me No Lullaby | 279 |
| Starcross Story (The) | 390 |
| *Tender Trap (The) | 282 |
| Traveling Lady (The) | 267 |
| *Wedding Breakfast | 243 |
| Winner (The) | 365 |

CRTICS' CIRCLE AWARD ..... 330

*Theatre Openings*

"Mrs. Patterson" "Hit the Trail"

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 6, 1954*

*Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.*

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

*Yearly Subscription $25.00*

*Published by* CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

# "Hit the Trail"

The New York Times

December 3, 1954

## Theatre: Way Out West

### 'Hit the Trail' Arrives at Mark Hellinger

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"HIT THE TRAIL," which opened at the Mark Hellinger Thursday evening, is the sort of operetta that brings out the native gallantry in show people. In book and score it is decorous but insipid after a style that probably was acceptable years ago.

But you would never suspect that from the performance. Everybody plays it as though it were "South Pacific" or "Kiss Me, Kate." No one ever lets it down. Devotion to the job in hand no doubt may be expected of the principals. Irra Petina, as a temperamental opera star; Robert Wright, as a noble banker of the solvent West, and Paul Valentine, as an irresistible rogue, have the big roles, the big scenes and the big salaries; and it is worth their while to pretend that they are in the most gorgeous extravaganza of the season.

But the minor actors and the boys and girls are just as loyal. They whirl through Gene Bayliss' dance numbers with gaiety, charm and abandon. Even when they are hardly more than part of the scenery to the big numbers, they take an interest in the scene as though they were seeing it for the first time. When they are expected to applaud, they applaud with enthusiasm. No matter how colorless a song may be or how heavy-handed a joke, they give it wide, white smiles of appreciation. After weeks of rehearsals, revisions and road tours, they put on a fresh, clean performance that is full of visual charm and good spirit.

The book of "Hit the Trail," written by Frank O'Neill, sets out to record the adventures of a theatrical troupe stranded in Nevada in the nineteenth century. As one of Elizabeth Miele's early lyrics phrases it:

When you join a theatrical troupe
You're up to your neck in the soup.

Proceeding to demonstrate the truth of that observation, "Hit the Trail" wanders at random through saloons, parks, beauty parlors and other convenient locales, giving the leading lady an opportunity to choose between a theatrical crook and an honest banker.

Her choice, which she makes at a lavish birthday party, is just a trifle ambiguous. But since she and the banker sing a reprise of "Mr. Right," presumably he is the one she puts the drop on.

As the composer for the evening, Frederico Valerio has written the required number of sentimental melodies and several songs in a lighter vein. There is a lively dance tune called "Nevada Hoe Down" that concludes the first act.

Although the music is mostly conventional, Arthur Norris conducts an orchestra that plays with professional skill and enthusiasm. And although the story is undistinguished in an obsolete vein, Leo Kerz has provided original, thoroughly modern scenery that makes ingenious use of silhouettes and sliding forms composed of slats. Mr. Kerz' contribution is one of the top scene-designing jobs of the season.

"HIT THE TRAIL"

Musical comedy with book by Frank O'Neill, music by Frederico Valerio, lyrics by Elizabeth Miele; staged by Charles W. Christenberry Jr. and Byrle Carr; dances staged by Gene Bayliss; settings by Leo Kerz; costumes by Michi; presented by Elizabeth Miele at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, December 2, 1954. The cast:

Jerry.....Donn Driver
Joan.....Diana Drake
Willie.....Fred Lightner
Clayton Harrison..Paul Valentine
Lucy Vernay.....Irra Petina
Murph.....Robert Wright
Aggie July.....Toby Deane
Miller.....Charles G. Martin
Waiters.....Jack Purcell and Rene Miville

Under the dual direction of Charles W. Christenberry Jr. and Byrle Cass, the performance has pace and variety. The actors and technicians gallantly maintain the illusion of participating in a masterpiece. After working so exhaustingly over such a long period of time, they probably know that "Hit the Trail" is a pointless show. The author and the composer are not up to the professional level of the performers.

Journal American

December 3, 1954

## New Musical Reminiscent

### Petina's Singing a High Spot In Script Full of Cliches

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE curtain had only been lifted a few minutes on a new musical, "Hit the Trail," which opened at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, when I had that old feeling that I'd seen it all before.

A lot of troupers, stranded in a small Western city, started singing a number called "On With the Show," all about how they were going to keep the show on the road, and then the comedy relief, a local character labeled Willie, rushed onstage and almost his first words were, "I've got news for you!"

It didn't seem possible that this pace could be maintained but (I've got news for YOU) it was. Before you could say "Irra Petina" she was right there, the star of the show, singing a number listed as "Mr. Right."

### Many Cliches

Well, the tabulation could go on indefinitely. What cliche will you have? There is the sleek and no-good manager of the troupe who gambles away the company's money.

There is the handsome and trusting local banker who gives the diva the money to stay in town and open a beauty emporium; there is even that lovable young couple (dancers, of course), who haven't enough money to get married. And there is, natch, the great European star who is an incorrigible flirt but really has a golden though slightly cracked heart.

In the matter of reminiscent numbers I need only advise you that there are three farmers who fling themselves all over the joint and lead a first act finale with, "Nevada Hoe Down."

There is a pantomine card game; a little episode in which a girl's face is plastered with lather (big switch,—this time they use a GIRL); a couple of rollicking drunk scenes, and a girl called Aggie singing a song entitled, "Men Are a Pain in the Neck."

These are by no means all the gems in this lavalier, but time's a'wastin' (as I'm sure somebody in the show remarked).

### Fine Dance Team

The only elements that spoiled what would have been an evening of unsullied embarrassment were the facts that Irra Petina has a good voice, and some of her music (not lyrics) was creditable; the same can be said of Robert Wright.

Diana Drake and Donn Driver, the dance team, managed to rise above all else with a couple of energetic routines which had nothing to do with the surroundings. Paul Valentine, except for one number in which he almost knocked himself out, remained comfortably at the level of the proceedings.

There must have been less likely musicals, but this should certainly win an award for the season.

DAILY NEWS
December 3, 1954

# 'Hit the Trail,' Hapless Musical, Opens at the Hellinger Theatre

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It was a sad and pathetic time at the Mark Hellinger Theatre last evening when a musical titled "Hit the Trail" opened with all the fine hopes that go with a premiere on both sides of the stage apron. Here were two talented and personable singers, Irra Petina and Robert Wright, gallantly displaying their fine skills on the stage. Here, hopefully lurking somewhere, must have been the composer, the lyric writer, the author of the plot and the producer. And here, too, was I, occupying one of the best aisle seats in an aggravated state of misery. So much hope, so much work and so much money were bestowed upon so little.

"Hit the Trail" purports to be a show about Virginia City, Nev., during the great mining boom of the late 1800s. Tune for tune, lyric for lyric and dance number for dance number, it might just as easily be called a memorial to Miami Beach hotel life in early 1955. And—except for the principals I have mentioned—it might as well be performed by whatever singers, comedians and dancers one might be able to dig up out of any good resort hotel register.

### A Series of Cues

So far as its book goes, "Hit the Trail" is a thin string of song cues. When it is time for one number to end, somebody says, in effect, "This reminds me of my birthday," and then there is a birthday number. The plot has none of the flavor and authenticity of the gold rush that "Paint Your Wagon" had—and the music and lyrics are not in the same league.

Elizabeth Miele, the lyric-writer and also the producer, is content whenever the song lines rhyme, which is always—as in the sample case of "I felt romantic but she only drove me frantic." So far as my ear could judge, the composer, Frederico Valerio, has done no better—and if there is anything more disheartening than a verbal cliche it is a musical cliche. All the book writer, Frank O'Neill, has had to do is drop in an occasional line cueing in the next number.

### One Funny Number

There is one number in "Hit the Trail" which has some zip and imagination. This small spectacle, staged by Donn Driver, pictures a group of women doing reducing exercises in a beauty salon. It is funny — but this musical, supposedly about a crude Nevada mining camp, is called "Hit the Trail" and not "Hit the Tail."

The scenery, by Leo Kerz, is a modest and nicely lighted set of cut-out drops. They'll be easy to pack. Much easier to pack than all the sorrows that will go with the show, including my own.

---

Daily Mirror
December 3, 1954

# 'Hit the Trail' Should Do Just That—Very Soon

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Since turkey is usually served on Thanksgiving, Elizabeth Miele missed the boat by bringing her own juicy bird—"Hit the Trail"—to town a week later. Some of us trapped in the Mark Hellinger Theatre Thursday evening wondered if we were dreaming, if such things could happen in this day and age.

• • •

IT WAS AS though Rodgers and Hart and Rodgers and Hammerstein had never set new standards for American musicals. And it must have made a few cynics, who claimed "The Boy Friend" overshot the mark in satirizing vintage song-and-dancers, eat their words. Come to think of it, had "Hit the Trail" been done with expert tongue-in-cheek, it might well have been called "The Girl Friend."

**For in every aspect, it smacks of the old-fashioned, outmoded musicals that seem so ludicrous to the smart youngsters of today. The book is primitive, the lyrics June-moony and the music mediocre. Frank O'Neill is blamed in the program for the limping libretto, and Frederico Valerio for the tinkly tunes. As for the lyrics, Miss Miele can blame only herself.**

What story there is has to do with an opera company that goes bust in a Nevada mining town before the turn of the century. The prima donna latches on to the likable local banker, while the heel of a leading man gets snagged by a brassy blonde in a gin-mill. There are other complications, but we prefer to forget them.

**THE DIRECTION** is attributed to Charles W. Christenberry, Jr. and Byrle Cass, and the choreography to Gene Bayliss. They have successfully captured all the inanities and cliches inherent in this incredible charade.

**Some first-rate performers have been caught in Miss Miele's fiasco. There's Irra Petina, singing like an angel, and forced to act like the heroine in a 1999 road company of "Madame Sherry," Robert Wright, Paul Valentine, Diana Drake, Donn Driver, Toby Deane, Fred Lightner and Charles G. Martin are other unfortunates in the company.**

To the credit of all, they give their all in a losing cause. Each and every one of them merits a citation for valor under fire. And it should be reported that a lot of the customers blistered their palms applauding, particularly in the second act.

Early in the proceedings, a trouper sitting atop a stage coach remarked prophetically: "This is a disaster!" One we had to see to really believe could happen in 1954.

---

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 3, 1954

THEATER

# 'Hit the Trail'

By WALTER F. KERR

### *Out of the West*

RIGHT in the middle of a long, languid song in the long, languid musical that opened Thursday, the baritone took out his watch and consulted it. This was the ultimate injury. There we were, sitting so politely—and *he* looks at his watch.

• • •

As I say, the premiere audience at the Hellinger was very patient. It betrayed almost no emotion at all as the same baritone, clad in a frock-coat characteristic of Nevada in the nineteenth century, strolled into the leading-lady's frontier dressing-room, picked up her picture—a daguerrotype, I presume—and tenderly fondled it at center stage while he sang to it ("Kiss me and say good by and set me free"). It should be mentioned that the aforesaid leading-lady is, at this time, clinging to the stage-right portal, overhearing every syllable that falls from his lips.

The stout fellow breaks down in the song. He turns away (he may or may not be hiding a tear). He is ready to go. Now, from the portals, comes the sound of an anguished soprano. She is singing ("Kiss me and say good by and set me free"). The gentleman hears. His ears perk up. His back straightens. He turns, amazed. There she is, after all. Arms extended, he goes to her. Together, they sing ("Kiss me and say good by and set me free"). The lights fade, the curtains close, and some new delight is made ready for us.

• • •

Subsequent delights include: a number in which dance-hall girls—dressed in red—kick their legs from the top of a bar, and which ends with a passel of cowhands aiming their six-shooters right at the audience; a number in which six or seven lovelies rehearse a "butterfly" dance, to the

## "Hit the Trail"—*continued*

tune of a tear-jerking ballad the while they bump violently into one another and grimace fiercely at the customers; an episode in which a chorine is strapped to a barber-chair and given a 'beauty' treatment that requires cold-cream to be spattered all over the stage; and a choked-up bit of sentiment in which a gentleman speaks, with a perfectly straight face, of his lonely, lonely house—so lonely that he can hear it crying in the night sometimes, and can see its tear-drenched windows.

• • •

If the samples above lack a certain coherence, they come by their chaos honorably. "Hit the Trail" is a masterpiece of irrelevance. Librettist Frank O'Neill is telling some sort of story about a bankrupt prima donna ("But I am an artist!") and her wheedling lover ("After all I've done for you!") who are stranded in the wide-open spaces ("This land—it's rough and untamed, alive and growing.") The lover picks up with a local entertainer ("Tonight Clayton Harrison sings only for you!") while the lady latches onto a rough-hewn native ("We don't talk like that out here, Mister.")

These aimless folk sing pre-Romberg lyrics which dwell on the beauties of "the thrill of your kiss, brings heavenly bliss," or on the extremely pre-Porter humors of "Cleopatra shook her fan, and reclined on her divan, that is how she got her man." They are interrupted pretty frequently by a comedy song-and-dance couple borrowed from "Showboat." The couple tell jokes: "I'm looking for you."

"Well, I'll help you. You go that way, and I'll go this way."

• • •

Through it all—an Egyptian beauty salon figures prominently in the action for some unexplained reason—the talented Irra Pettina snaps her fingers and stamps her feet willingly. With a voice like melted butter, she does more than justice to the Frederico Valerio score. If a slight air of distaste hovers about the star's manner, she is surely not to be blamed. Paul Valentine, as the gambling man who has got her into all this trouble, ought to be blamed, I think. Mr. Valentine struts, swaggers, and leaps into the air with a curiously misplaced confidence, doubling the emphasis on everything that is most distressing about the enterprise.

It is only designer Leo Kerz who salvages anything. He is working in what might be called the "new" musical manner, substituting simplified set-pieces, angular portals, and pastel backdrops for the usual costly gingerbread. His images are sometimes fresh and attractive. But they are about a century ahead of the show.

---

## New York Post

December 3, 1954

### By Richard Watts Jr.

## Something Called 'Hit the Trail'

In 1943, when this reviewer was briefly back in the United States between wartime assignments, he saw, as an innocent, non-reviewing spectator, a musical comedy called "Hairpin Harmony," and has always remembered it as one of the epoch-making disasters of his lifelong playgoing.

Then, a couple of years ago, there was a girl-and-music show known as "Buttrio Square," and it was memorably calamitous, too. There was something about both works that made them, in a singularly macabre sort of way, cling to my theatrical memory.

I was thinking of them last night at the Mark Hellinger Theater, where a musical play bearing the title of "Hit the Trail" was having its opening performance. Memory can play strange tricks, and I certainly wouldn't say for a minute that "Hit the Trail" was as bad as either "Hairpin Harmony" or "Buttrio Square." It is doubtful if it could be. Indeed, concentrating on the rather remarkable and historic ineptness of the two earlier misfortunes made me, I feel, a bit more tolerant of the new work at the Hellinger.

Nevertheless, thinking over "Hit the Trail" as detachedly as possible, I am unable to recall that it possesses a redeeming feature as professional Broadway entertainment. Its book, which is by Frank O'Neill, comes as close to being nothing as a musical comedy libretto readily could. Its music, which is the work of a composer named Frederico Valerio, is at best "reminiscent." Its lyrics, which are attributed to Elizabeth Miele, the show's producer, are primitive. The dances are unexciting and the show isn't notable for good looks of any kind.

Perhaps a few details should be set down. The book is about a musical troupe stranded in Virginia City during the later gold-rush days. The score contains numbers called "Mr. Right," "Dynamic," "Nevada Hoe Down," "The Wide Open Spaces" and, ominously, "No! No! No!" As for the lyrics, we all should conceivably have been warned when the opening number had the chorus rhyming "troupe" with "soup." There is also a comedy song known as "Men Are a Pain in the Neck."

**Energetic Actor**

Then, there are the performers, who are deserving of human sympathy upon such occasions. Take the case of Paul Valentine, who plays a kind of dashing villain. Mr. Valentine is a highly competent actor, who was excellent in a fairly similar role in "Wish You Were Here." Last night he was toiling away with such unending energy and gave every evidence of enjoying himself so hugely that he probably didn't have time to notice that things were going terribly.

The heroine is Irra Petina, who has a good voice and a certain industrious sense of comedy. That comedy sense was in part devoted to dressing as Cleopatra and smearing the face of a harmless chorus girl with lather or something. The hero is pleasantly enough managed by Robert Wright, but there isn't much he can do about it. That goes for the other worthy members of Actors' Equity. It may be said of the chorus girls that they, too, are industrious. I guess I didn't care much for "Hit the Trail."

---

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 3, 1954

# 'Hit the Trail' Opens At Mark Hellinger

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is a ghostly quality about "Hit the Trail" at the Mark Hellinger, like a dream that is never going to come true.

The new musical has some pretty tunes, willing performers and an effective production scheme.

But its ideas are all in the dough stage. They are not just half-baked. They are not even kneaded.

Irra Petina is starred in this eerie work about a theatrical troupe stranded in Virgina City in the '90s.

The reason she is a star is plain. She comports herself with authority, when the material must make her cringe. She sings with taste and the elegance of a prima donna, when the music is all echo. And she makes the comedy sound crisp, when it is limp as a wet blotter.

You could hardly call the other principals competent under the circumstances.

**Grin Pays Off.**

Robert Wright plays a Nevada Irishman who falls for, loses and finally wins the singer. In a pinch, he knows the value of a grin. And he dances with a friendly awkwardness that makes you think Buddy Ebsen might be doing a musical life of Abe Lincoln.

Paul Valentine fills the position ordinarily labeled "villain." This plot is too mapless to deserve such place names. Besides, Mr. Valentine plays the gambler in his own elaborately casual manner which approximates a parody of himself. He sings with ironic mock passion, and dances with a gargantuan effort that last night brought the house to a rare roar.

Diana Drake and Donn Driver work loyally without reward until they come upon a minstrel imitation.

**Undistinguished Songs.**

Toby Deane looks mighty cute, but her songs are so undistinguished they are all but impossible to follow.

Good direction might help to save the play. The present situation is a muss. An intimate duet is done on a huge empty stage. Eight people play a card game before the front curtain.

# "Mrs. Patterson"

**Daily Mirror**

December 2, 1954

## 'Mrs. Patterson' Misses At National Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It is easy to see why Leonard Sillman decided to star Eartha Kitt in Charles Sebree's and Greer Johnson's "Mrs. Patterson," which arrived at the National Theatre Wednesday evening. For it is a script notable for imagination, a quality too often missing in the show shops nowadays.

* * *

**UNFORTUNATELY,** Sebree and Johnson haven't been able to settle for a straight drama, a musical, a fantasy or a satire. They have varied the mood from scene to scene, with consequent loss of cumulative effect. What should be a tender and truly touching play of starry-eyed adolescence becomes that only on occasion.

**Sebree and Johnson are concerned with a young Negro girl living on the edge of a small town in Kentucky back in the 1920's. Her idol is a Mrs. Patterson, who gives lawn parties and isn't averse to cheating at whist. The youngster envisions herself being hostess at similar soirees.**

To these come the Devil, a flashy gambler and even Mrs. Patterson. There is also a sinner, condemned by the Devil to live in a tree, who pops up with advice now and then. Eventually the girl thinks of running away to Chicago with an ambitious and venturesome handyman. But she is stopped by her mother, who wants her to have an education and come by the good things of life honestly.

**THIS MOTHER,** incidentally, is a fine woman, with an admirable philosophy. She has made the mistake of loving a man without benefit of marriage license. She knows that things are constantly changing for the better. As she tells her daughter, grown-ups have to think night and day. So don't be in a hurry to grow up, dream while you can.

**Guthrie McClintic has assembled an excellent cast, yet somehow has not been able to help the authors establish a sustained and evocative mood. Miss Kitt, a wonderful song stylist, achieves some amazing technical results as the girl, but never gains for her as much sympathy as she deserves.**

Ruth Attaway plays the mother with effective simplicity. She has the heart and the feeling for her role. Estelle Hemsley is fascinating as a likable, eccentric kleptomaniac. Avon Long, who has few peers at giving style to a bravura part, is an ingratiating Devil. Helen Dowdy, as the blues-singing tree-captive, and Emory Richardson, as a genius who mates bees and fireflies so they can work at night, are delightful.

* * *

**SALUTES** are also due Terry Carter, as the boy who runs away to Chicago; Enid Markey, as the shrewd Mrs. Patterson; Vinie Burrows, Mary Ann Hoxworth, Mary Harmon and Joan Morgan. They make the most of their assignments, within writing and directorial limits.

**James Shelton has written six songs for the play, five for Miss Kitt and one for Miss Dowdy. You will no doubt be hearing some of them on records soon. But, in our opinion, they merely take up space that could have been used to better advantage in the development and explanation of the characters.**

"Mrs. Patterson" has so much to recommend it that we can only say, with regret, not quite enough. Imagination is a wonderful thing in the theatre, but, like any overwhelming tide, must be harnessed constructively. Otherwise, it's just an undisciplined force.

**"MRS. PATTERSON"**

Play by Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson; staged by Guthrie McClintic; settings and costumes by Raoul Pene duBois; songs and incidental music by James Shelton; presented by Leonard Sillman at the National Theatre, December 1, 1954. The cast:

Anna Hicks.....Ruth Attaway
Selma Mae.....Vinie Burrows
Theodora (Teddy) Hicks.....
Eartha Kitt
Willie B. Brayboy..Terry Carter
Aunt Matt Crosby.....
Estelle Hemsley
Mr. D.....Avon Long
Bessie Bolt.....Helen Dowdy
Sylvanus....Emory Richardson
Mrs. Patterson...Enid Markey
June Embree.....
Mary Ann Hoxworth
Rose Embree....Mary Harmon
Fern Embree.....Joan Morgan

**DAILY NEWS**

December 2, 1954

## Eartha Kitt a Stunning Actress In a Lovely Play, 'Mrs. Patterson'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Eartha Kitt is a wonderful and fascinating little actress, and her play, "Mrs. Patterson," is the most exciting piece of theatre I have encountered so far this season. Last night's first performance at the National Theatre was a holiday for me.

"Mrs. Patterson" is not exciting in the melodramatic or big-thrill sense, for it is a modest and tidy story, partly fantasy and occasionally a musical, about a young girl. The pleasant thrills it offers come from the way it has been conceived and written and from the splendid way it is acted by a remarkable company. In directing this company, Guthrie McClintic has put the theatre back where it belongs—"in the mind's eye," as the heroine of the play would say.

**World of Her Own**

The authors of "Mrs. Patterson," Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson, tell of a 15-year-old Negro girl who lives with her fine, hard-working mother in a shanty in North Carolina. The mother gains her small livelihood mostly by being the laundress for a grand white lady named Mrs. Patterson. Her daughter, nicknamed Teddy, wears Mrs. Patterson's hand-me-downs, made over.

Young Teddy is not an ordinary barefoot urchin, plodding through an already dismal life, for she has imagination. When she is alone, she can dream of many rich things—of being a society lady and entertaining Mrs. Patterson and her giggly nieces at tea, or of being on speaking terms with the remarkably engaging and crafty Mr. Devil himself, and winning a few games of blackjack with the backing of Mr. D.

Teddy's mother has always told her that her father, whom she has never seen, is a great rich man in Chicago with a pearl as big as your thumbnail for a stickpin. It is Teddy's one dream to go to Chicago and be a swell, even after she learns that she never had a father in the proper sense. She almost hops a freight, with an ambitious young neighbor lad who loves her, to get the promised land—but something stops her. What stops her is a new sense of reality . . . a realization that her life is right here in the shanty with her mother.

**A New Actress**

It is a touching story and very often a funny one—and Miss Kitt, known heretofore by me only as a wriggly singer of sultry songs, is a touching and funny actress. I have not seen a performance so unexpectedly stunning and perfect since Julie Harris burst into view as the tomboy in "The Member of the Wedding." Miss Kitt can act, from her restless bare toes right up to the nimble brain behind her slanty eyes.

Miss Kitt can sing, too, of course. The little songs she does, written by Sebree, Johnson and James Shelton, fit naturally into the play. She sings of "Mrs. Patterson," "Tea in Chicago" and "My Daddy Is a Dandy." As a concession to juke-box fans, she does an afterpiece to the show titled "Be Good, Be Good, Be Good," which has nothing to do with the play but is enjoyable anyhow.

**Splendid Company**

The company is remarkable and richly varied. Ruth Attaway gives a steadfast and moving performance as the girl's mother. Enid Markey offers a hilarious caricature of a Southern grand lady as Mrs. Patterson. Avon Long, old Sportin' Life himself, is fascinating as the kind of Mr. Devil only a young girl could imagine, and Estelle Hemsley is the most expert character actress in town as she plays a religious old fraud. Helen Dowdy contributes to the fantasy as a woman whom Mr. D. has condemned to live in a tree because she gambled too hard, and Terry Carter is fine as the neighbor boy.

The setting, by Raoul Pene duBois—a shanty and a haunted tree—is just what the play calls for, and duBois' costumes are just as delightfully imagined as "Mrs. Patterson" itself is.

## New York Post

December 2, 1954

### By Richard Watts Jr.

### Eartha Kitt as a Dramatic Star

We should be grateful for a display of imaginative freshness in the drama this season, and "Mrs. Patterson" has its touch of this commendable quality. The new play by Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson, which opened last night at the National Theater, also has the advantage of an immensely magnetic performance by the fascinating Eartha Kitt in the leading, though not the title, role. It does seem a shame, however, that this gentle and disarming narrative about the growing pains of a little Negro girl is quite so desultory in its manner.

Dealing, as it does, with the discovery of the real world about her by a 15-year-old girl with a romantic imagination, "Mrs. Patterson" is considerably reminiscent of Carson McCullers' memorable "The Member of the Wedding." It has something of that fine play's touching and understanding wistfulness about it, and much of its compassion for human bewilderment. There is a ruefully humorous sense of decency in its contemplation of a sensitive child's bewilderment that gives the play an attractive head start in its emotional appeal.

**Yes and No**

Yet—and there always appears to be a "yet" in connection with the plays this year—"Mrs. Patterson" suffers seriously from what seems to me the fact that its engaging imagination is a little skimpy, a little intermittent, and decidedly sketchy in its dramatic effectiveness. I don't think it is possible not to feel a kind of affection for what the Messrs. Seebree and Johnson have written out of the fullness of their hearts. But it is also hard not to suspect that their drama lacks the final creative spark to make it properly alive in terms of the theater.

In the course of the play, Miss Kitt sings five incidental songs, and it may be this which caused me to feel that "Mrs. Patterson" might have seemed more satisfying if it had been done frankly as a musical drama. As it is, the important dream scenes, in which the girl imagines the aristocratic white lady of the nearby community and an amiable devil, who is her friend rather than her enemy; are just a little too lacking in theatrical interest. There is, I think, an air of incompleteness in the dramatization of the child's appealing plight.

**The Star**

Although the play tends to falter, its star certainly never does. To begin with, Miss Kitt is a very exciting young woman, which is no handicap to her at all. But she is also an interesting and resourceful actress, possessing an authentic sense of characterization. She can say with wistful pride that she once had a steak to eat, and it becomes both deeply touching and poignantly revealing. The girl she is playing becomes not only appealing and real, but a person worth bothering about. There is no doubt that Miss Kitt has arrived as a dramatic actress.

The other performances, too, are excellent. Enid Markey, an unfailing actress, has the brief role of the dream Mrs. Patterson, and plays it with all of her customary combination of guile and simplicity. The heroine's mother is a troubled and moving human being at the hands of Ruth Attaway, and there are admirable characterizations by Vinie Burrows as a neighborhood girl who fights and makes up with the heroine, by Terry Carter as a boy who wants to run away, and by Estelle Hemsley as a pious aunt given to minor pilfering. "Mrs. Patterson" is far from a sturdy vehicle, but Miss Kitt is immense.

---

## New York Herald Tribune

December 2, 1954

THEATER

### *'Mrs. Patterson'*

By WALTER F. KERR

***Miss Kitt***

AT THE end of "Mrs. Patterson," the new play-with-music at the National, Eartha Kitt is standing in the yard of a ramshackle house somewhere in Kentucky, her fists clenched and her eyes glistening. She is a fifteen-year-old who has dreamed of great things for herself, and who has had to surrender her dreams one by one. But there's fight in the little girl yet. She's going to make it, she tells us, to Chicago and the bright lights some day. She's going to make it fast—and in her own style.

The lithe, mocking and captivating Miss Kitt has been doing some very fast work as a performer. Two years ago she was making her Broadway debut as one of a score of players in an intimate revue; now Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson have handed her a whole play to scamper around in.

• • •

And if any one has a style of her own, it's this fiendishly graceful hoyden with the tongue of a magpie. In "Mrs. Patterson" we meet her in a tattered calico dress, swinging her hands restlessly against her skirt, kicking her bare feet into the air and displaying a fancy pink ribbon on an elegant left wrist. She is strictly "poor folk," but the ribbon has a meaning. She wants to grow up to be "a rich white woman," to have afternoon tea with her mother's employer, to live in a wonderful world that isn't so "samey."

As she wraps herself in a mile-long boa, makes herself snug under a fashionable floppy hat, or teeters down a flight of stairs in borrowed high heels, Miss Kitt is the picture of snub-nosed and uppitty childhood. Perched precariously on the branch of a tree, her head slipping and sliding from one shoulder to another, she is an enchanting gamin.

• • •

When she turns her attention to the five snatches of song that James Shelton has written for her—these crop up at odd intervals in what is otherwise a "straight" moodpiece—her brittle, unpredictable, sometimes startling style becomes even more marked. Some of the lyrics rattle out with a trip-hammer rhythm; occasionally the voice sprags and a kind of long, locomotive whistle hoot hangs in the air; there are times when Miss Kitt just chucks the whole thing with a growl; and times when she spits out the words like cherry stones. The songs aren't very melodic — a yearning refrain called "Tea in Chicago" is something of an exception—but they do give the star a chance to toss her eccentric, and fascinating, phrasing over the footlights.

• • •

Now to the unhappy news. If Miss Kitt bristles with style, her play has almost no style at all. The Messrs. Sebree and Johnson have plunged, headlong and unafraid, into fantasy. The only things that really happen all evening happen in this romantic girl's dreams: the devil in this case a Mr. D., bounces into view; a hefty bad girl who has already made Chicago appears high up in the trunk of a tree; Mrs. Patterson herself, in all her Southern finery, breezes in for an afternoon social.

The framework is colorful, the imagined incidents ought to be both funny and touching. But the authors seem always to have settled for their first thoughts: the fantasy is everywhere literal, direct, flatfooted. A Southern accent is assumed to be amusing enough in itself; no really spirited line of dialogue, or pertinent comment, ever comes out of it. It is enough for the devil to leap and speak rapidly; neither his leaps nor his speeches express a point of view.

• • •

The evening's inventive level, in fact, never rises a notch above the strangely routine costumes Raoul Pene du Bois has designed for the dream-figures: patched frock coat and battered top hat for the devil; sequins and oversize buttons for one of his cohorts; fluttery pink-and-blue organdie for the matron who comes to call. The finery is extravagantly obvious; and the people who move around it become strained caricatures. The play is slowly paced when it is waiting for a dream; and it is heavy-handed when it gets one.

• • •

Several members of the company have done exceptional work, though. Ruth Attaway, in the unrewarding role of the visionary's mother, has enormous force and dignity. Estelle Hemsley, as a chatterbox old preaching-woman who'd "steal the wax out of your ears," is delectable. And Enid Markey all but empties her miraculous bag of tricks in an effort to give the aristocratic Mrs. Patterson, who "brews her own essence of magnolia," some sort of comic meaning. Avon Long, normally a sure-fire performer, is seen as Mr. D. His failure to drive any joy into this satanic busybody is symptomatic of the evening's difficulties.

The New York Times
December 2, 1954

# *Theatre: Eartha Kitt Plays Dreamer*

## Singer Turns Actress in 'Mrs. Patterson'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE Eartha Kitt is an oddly gifted actress, she is a good match for an off-beat play. That might serve as a quick description of "Mrs. Patterson," which opened at the National Wednesday evening.

Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson have written the fantasticated portrait of a harum-scarum Negro child who has dreams of glory. What Frankie was to "The Member of the Wedding," Teddy is to "Mrs. Patterson" — gauche, tense, wildly imaginative, restless for an exciting life. It is a good part for Miss Kitt. She plays it with animal agility and youthful charm.

•

But the authors have something more than a character portrait in mind. To make a contrast with Teddy's poverty-stricken life in a Kentucky shack, they have interpolated some gaudy dreams. Teddy dreams up the devil (played with drollery by Avon Long); and the succeeding dreams include some glamorous wickedness amid the fleshpots of Chicago and an elegant tea party with white ladies whom she envies. Since Miss Kitt is a celebrated singer, the authors have also found places for several tender, childish songs composed by James Shelton.

As this hasty description may indicate, "Mrs. Patterson" has ambitious plans. It aspires to something with more grace than the usual run of theatre. Under Guthrie McClintic's appreciative and thoughtful direction, the production and the performance go as far as the authors' invention permits. Perhaps a little farther. For Raoul Pene du Bois' settings and costumes have real magic. The slatternly shack and dooryard manages somehow to look romantic; and the fantasticated costumes for the dream sequences have a humorous splendor that is delightful.

•

Some pretty good things can be said about the acting, too. Enid Markey's caricature of a fastidious, condescending Southern lady has a broad style and a sweep of comedy. As Teddy's mother, Ruth Attaway honestly conveys the patience and anxiety of a woman who, having suffered, hopes to bring her child peace. Estelle Hemsley is very funny as a neighborhood crone whose talk is pious and behavior gross. And Terry Carter is excellent as Teddy's suitor whose head is whirling with ideas and dreams.

All this is certainly in "Mrs. Patterson's" favor as an unusual piece for the stage. But it is necessary to add that, in the opinion of this theatregoer, "Mrs. Patterson" never really achieves the lift it aspires to. There seems to be something lifeless at the core of the written drama. It is a literal sort of fairy-tale, the outlines intelligently designed, but the poetry, the wistfulness, the sorcery are missing. The dialogue is pedestrian. And the story does not get much further than a narrative of episodes.

Those comments are made here with regret. For the plan of "Mrs. Patterson" is original, and the stage work is of high order. Miss Kitt deserves a career in the theatre. She is an incandescent young woman with lively intelligence, a darting style of movement, keen eyes and an instinct for the stage. Although her speaking voice is interesting, it does not have much variety or richness. There are probably tenderer places in Teddy's character than Miss Kitt is able to express vocally.

But she is gifted. Some day she may find a play equally bizarre but more responsive than "Mrs. Patterson." Mr. Sebree and Mr. Johnson, as the authors, have their minds in the right place. The imagination is the thing that is missing.

Journal-American
December 2, 1954

# Eartha Kitt Excellent In Earthbound Play

## Star Shines in Dramatic Role As 15-Year-Old

By JOHN McCLAIN

EARTHA KITT is a gifted young Negro who made a sensation with a song, called "Monotonous" in "New Faces of 1952," and last night she was deployed as the dramatic star of "Mrs. Patterson," a new play with music which opened at the National Theatre.

Monotonous is one of the words that might be used in connection with this little bijou which rambles around, offers occasional moments of pathos and humor and some quite good writing but doesn't, in final analysis, go anywhere.

There hangs over the proceedings a sense of sameness, a continuous and futile preoccupation with the identical and apparently insoluable problems, and with no clear direction or resolution. If a moral emerges it is that poor Negroes living in Kentucky in 1920 were better off in their dreams than in the world of reality—and who's going to argue that?

These particular Negroes live in the shadow of a large house presided over by Mrs. Patterson and one of them, a girl of fifteen, has created her own little world of illusion in which she copies the styles and manners of the mistress of the domain.

This leads her to the point of running away to Chicago with her boy friend, to seek a glamorous world of her own, but she is brought back to reality at the critical moment by her mother's stern common sense.

### Series of Dreams

In telling this the authors have presented a series of dream sequences in which the various characters of the girl's imagination appear as she believes them to be, and much of this is charming. There are also some little songs (very tiny, most of them), which Miss Kitt sings in her engaging manner. These are highly stylized and did not, in my opinion, add appreciably to the mood of the evening.

In the portrayal of the fifteen-year-old girl, and as a serious actress however, Miss Kitt is a touching and vigorous performer, combining moments of emotional depth with an ability to leap from trees, fall off porches and rush on and off stage with the speed of light.

Ruth Attaway gives another of her brilliant and believable interpretations as the mother, and Enid Markey scores in the role of Mrs. Patterson as the girl imagines her. Plaudits should also go to Terry Carter, Estelle Hemsley, Vinie Burrows, Avon Long and Helen Dowdy.

### Good Costuming

Raoul Pene du Bois has designed a single set to represent the broken-down house and surroundings, quite adequate for the purpose, but I thought his costumes were particularly effective.

In "Mrs. Patterson" Eartha Kitt has established the fact that she can act. Now I wish she would put on something slinky and sing a song that was not supposed to have been made up by a fifteen-year-old girl.